DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 037 152 HE 001 308

AUTHOR Kent, Leonard J.
TITLE "Traditional" Graduate Grading and the "Gold Star Syndrome."
INSTITUTION Council of Graduate Schools in the U.S., Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 5 Dec 69
NOTE 6p., Address to the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Council of Graduate Schools in the U.S., Washington, D. C., Dec.4-6, 1969

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.40
DESCRIPTORS Faculty, *Grades (Scholastic), *Grading, *Graduate Study, *Higher Education, Pass Fail Grading, *Student Evaluation

ABSTRACT

The impetus for modifying or eliminating the A-F grading system has come primarily from students. Faculty reaction has been more one of bowing to pressure than that of a carefully considered response. Arguments for and against the traditional grading systems each have merit. It seems illogical, however, to repeat on the graduate level a grading system that has major shortcomings at the lower levels. The gold star in kindergarten and the A in college become ends in themselves. Students also confuse grades with emotional attachment--the teacher who likes you gives you an A. Thus, traditional grading practices have potential for corrupting the true purposes of education. A pass/withdraw system accompanied by substantive comments by the teacher may be an answer. The additional burden this will place on the teacher and the administrative inconvenience it may cause are the price that will have to be accepted. "Philosophy rather than procedure must rule the day." (AF)

ED037152

"TRADITIONAL" GRADUATE GRADING AND THE "GOLD STAR SYNDROME"

Leonard J. Kent, Dean of Graduate Studies
Chico State College, Chico, California
5 December 1969

In light of my scheduled appearance before you tonight after only some three months in office, two ideas haunted me: my predecessor at Chico who volunteered my services before he ever met me was either remarkably farseeing or alarmingly vindictive; I should plead gross ignorance and inexperience, and, having captivated you with my humility and sincerity, immediately plunge into a discussion of Wordsworth, or, at the very least, review an old paper I have written on the underrated flexibility of the semicolon. After looking at the general topic for discussion, two additional thoughts occurred to me more or less spontaneously: the students have finally got us on the run; no one can beat the "gold star syndrome."

Although I offer no solid evidence, it seems not unreasonable to maintain that, in large measure, the impetus for modifying or doing away with the A through F grading system has come essentially from students who are at once much less reticent than they were to pressure for action and more persistent in their demands that we supply rationale for our traditional approaches to education. It is admirable that despite a marked conservative bent many schools now seem to be moving towards partially or fully superseding traditional grading practices, but, if indeed, as many suspect, our increasing

HE 001 308

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

willingness to "experiment" has more to do with our reacting to pressure than it has to do with the implementation of teacher-created and nurtured ideas, the prognosis for success may be far less than good. I do not suggest that we should not react to justified heat: rather, that if we are reacting only to the heat generated at this moment in time, we may skimp on our total commitment to any newer kinds of evaluative processes which may emerge, and may attend the premature wake of ideas concerning evaluation which may be inherently well worth keeping alive.

My own school has been in existence for almost 100 years. She is just beginning to seriously confront this thing called grading practices. Is it that the traditional system is essentially so satisfactory that it has required no serious previous scrutiny: What has changed that now requires such concentrated and accelerated attention--the world, schools, teachers, students? I would like to think that we here may have had some part in this; but whether this is so or not, I suggest that we approach the admittedly complex question of grading with a degree of serenity and openmindedness so that we neither perpetuate what reason rejects because doing nothing is easiest, nor, in our haste and reaction, substitute approaches to evaluation which, born in external heat, remain dependent upon external heat.

In speaking to colleagues about grading I find that I am at times simultaneously impressed by the arguments on both sides of the A through F fence. One colleague is convincing when he speaks of the efficiency, the "synthesizing quality," of the letter grade and its ability to function as a tool for evaluation, communication, and motivation.

Another colleague is equally convincing when he argues that such grading, especially on the graduate level, is often demeaning and demoralizing and, at its worst, encourages some teachers to "cop out" and some students to become sycophants. Having thus admitted my own frequent ambivalence, I should yet take a stand.

I think there is something not efficacious in repeating on the graduate level a system of grading which seems to have major shortcomings on lower levels of operation. When I speak of the gold star syndrome I make reference to the traditional grading approaches perpetuating and reinforcing the unfortunate tendency of our society to latch on to, and to cling to, a quantitative rather than qualitative system of measurement, so that what becomes crucial is neither what you do nor the joy you discover in what you do, but rather, how much you make or how many hours you work. Translated into the college situation, the question becomes neither what you have learned, nor the joy you may have found in learning, but, rather, what are your grades?

The concentration on grades rather than work seems to ignore or slight the facts that study can be fun, that study should be pleasurable, that what graduate school may be about in part is learning as an end; this being so, learning is perhaps too round to be evaluated by being filed in square lettered drawers. The gold star, the A, should not be the ultimate aim even in kindergarten, where the child early comes to feel that one gold star is better than none, that fifty are better than one, and who, encouraged by parents who fall into the trap by rewarding the gold star rather than that which went into earning it, ultimately gets to the store and, by purchasing a whole box of gold

stars, achieves a version of heaven on earth.

Students also confuse grades with emotional attachment--the teacher who gives an A likes the student; the teacher who gives an F does not like him. The student, perhaps especially on the graduate level, looking for his gold star, somehow convinced that he needs to get the teacher to like him in order to get one, expends some of the energy which could be devoted to study and searching trying to "psych out" the teacher. Having learned to play the game, he continues to amass the gold stars while never coming to understand that graduate education should not perhaps offer courses called "Psyching Out 304" or "Pursuing Quantitative Ends 362."

In short, I feel, with many others, that traditional grading practices have a genuine potential for corrupting what education may be about. These practices may tend to reward the manipulator, they may tend to discourage creative impulses, they may tend to break into independent pieces what should be a whole, and they may tend to reinforce the gold star syndrome which sees the reward as something extrinsic to the work. The student who is so upset by the letter grade on a paper that he cannot read the comments of the teacher and profit from them may be a case in point.

Perhaps the Pass/Withdraw system in all graduate work may be salutary; and because there may need to be a way to distinguish between one "Pass" and another, the teacher should supply comment relative to the creativity, persistence, resourcefulness, analytical ability and general subject mastery of each student. These comments, together with examples of a student's work and a statement from the student concerning

his total college experience, might be submitted to the Graduate Dean, who, with this material in hand, may be able to render a qualitative judgment ever so much more accurate and valuable than that possible when relying almost exclusively on the transcript that so often comes across his desk, in which one student seems just about the same as most other students, and in which there is no way to determine what individual qualities the student may possess or how fired up he may be.

One argument against this approach--and a disturbingly valid one at that--is that it will unnecessarily burden the teacher, and that, being burdened, his comments will soon be drawn from a cliché file after he has had a chance to create a series of A through F recommendations. I think the burden of writing honest evaluations should be assumed to be part of the responsibility of teaching, and I think that the Graduate Dean receiving and reviewing cliché evaluations may impress upon the irresponsible or harrassed faculty member involved the need to try it again; or, having failed in this, may discount a particular evaluation in favor of those which seem to really tell us what makes Sammy run.

It will also be argued--again with some validity--that there will be confusion, that the introduction of any new approach to evaluation in favor of those which seem to really tell us what makes Sammy run.

It will also be argued--again with some validity--that there will be confusion, that the introduction of any new approach to evaluation, especially one which cannot be computerized, will result in registrars becoming distraught, and so on; indeed, that the introduction of a new partially or fully implemented system of evaluation will generally throw our ordered houses into disorder. Surely there will be diffuculties in adjusting which none of us looks forward to, but perhaps one of the advantages of such a readjustment may be to remind us that one major aspect of the administrative role (whether it be

Registrar or Graduate Dean) is to support the academic thrusts of the institution, and that there is no excuse for not supporting such a thrust on the basis of housekeeping problems. The thrusts must lead, never becoming subservient to considerations of order and efficiency. Philosophy rather than procedure must rule the day; and if, in doing away with the gold star syndrome, confusion visits our houses, I think we must be prepared to accept this price.

In human and professional terms, I find disturbing the rather arbitrary decisions I sometimes have to make based upon the magic number called required grade point average. The "scientific" 2.75, for example, for all its alleged efficiency and neutrality, for all its ability to remove responsibility from our shoulders, seems to a guy with a liberal arts orientation to do little to encourage the student or the system to take into consideration this thing called faith, those subjective and intangible aspects of judgment, which, in the last analysis, not only may encourage a student to reach out and do his own thing, but may be most accurate of all. Intuition is an admirable tool for which we need not apologize to our computers (if they had it we'd be working for them).

It is good that we examine grading practices. It will be better still if we examine them creatively and, by so doing, redefine, in part, what it is we are all about. It will be best if we continue to supply our own heat to refining and revising whatever evaluation practices most of us ultimately adopt. I believe with Tolstoy that the search for the answers bespeaks quality of soul, and that the constant attempt to find answers to complex problems may ultimately be more beneficial and truly important than the answers themselves.

I am delighted to be here.